

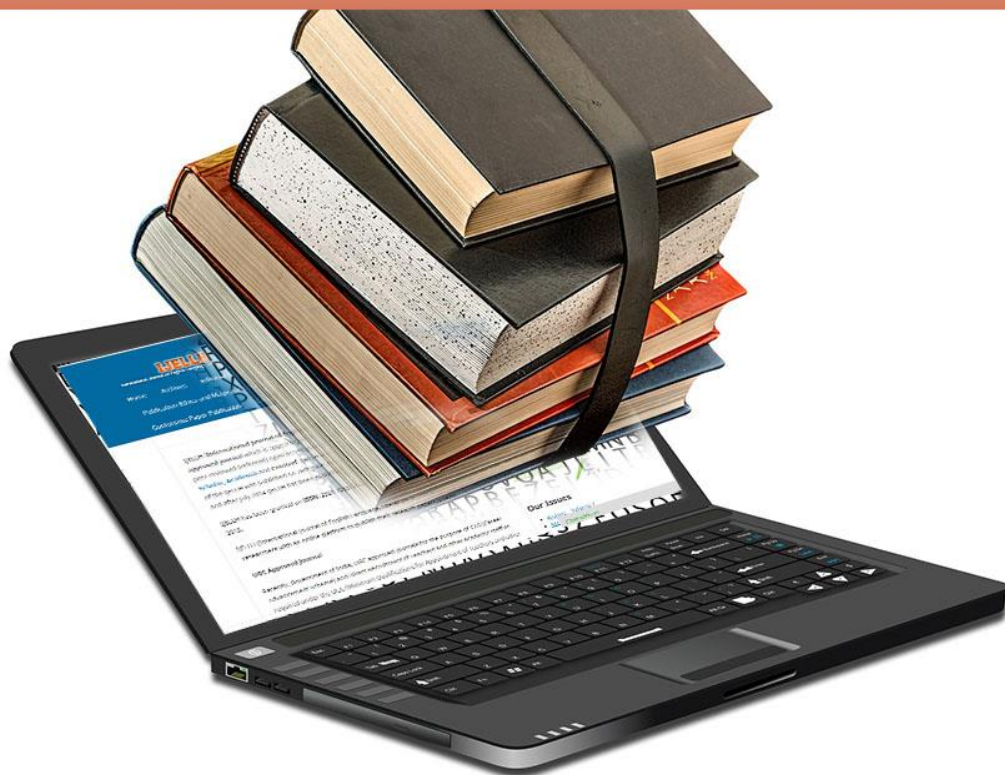
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Contemporary Indian Urban Middle Class and Its Education as Reflected in Chetan Bhagat's
Five Point Someone.

Abstract

The status of women in a country and its education system determines the society of a nation. Hence Bhagat's novel Five Point Someone has been considered as one ample area of study which religiously depicts the exact scenario of contemporary India, caught between class culture. The paper discusses the freewill of women towards sex, the discussion of which is still considered a taboo in the country. The hazards faced by the students once they enter a reputed engineering college, the stress and depression they face to fare well in the exams are also portrayed with a tinge of humour. Today's education institutions work as manufacturing units instead of catering education. The urban middle class runs after such institutions in order to have a better living like the rich.

The writing of Bhagat is more feminine than masculine. He voices and shows his responsibilities more to his women than to his men. He has loomed as an iconoclast for this masculine myth and has attempted to express the feelings of the women. He feels that women have equal right to urge for equality in society as men. Along with being competitive, ambitious, and techno-savvy, the new generation women in his novels are trendy as well. The international trend has not left the society untouched. Because of the free incoming values, dresses, costumes, and the western lifestyle, the base of Indian culture has been considerably influenced.

In his fiction, Bhagat deals about several things including the youth and their agonies, anxieties, feelings and joys but one common thing in his novels is his celebration of the loss of virginity by his woman characters. All his women enjoy pre-marital sex but none of them regrets it instead feels proud being done it.

In prehistoric India, though patriarchal system was extremely prevalent - all male chauvinism - women had a position of dignity and reverence. Several epitaphs make references to the status of women in that they enjoyed the privilege to make permissive contributions to religious institutes like temples, not solely for the prosperity of heads of the families but for their parents as well. Sex is something that enjoys the privilege of being regarded masculine. A woman, specifically in a nation like India where male chauvinism is an established tendency in all standards of the society and life, is not pretended to make a demand for it. Yet, it is not a genuine demand, there is something obsessed in our minds that we deter and discourage any such demand emerging from women. It appears as if sex is something of a personal possession or patent or fundamental right of women and men are nothing but a source which can be used any moment in any way.

Bhagat thinks that women have equal right to urge for sex and possibly she is the most authentic aspirant who deserves to initiate the dialogue concerning it. Sex and love are

no different things for Bhagat. He views both these as the two sides of the same coin, like tail and head.

With the publication of *Five Point Someone*, Bhagat received unparalleled popularity and recognition in Indian writing in English. He is the first man to draw the common youth of India to read a literary work written in English. Formerly, it is the monopoly of the literary scholars, university professors, English language experts and literary critics in India to read or discuss about works written in English. The theme of the novel is very simple and lucid. The language is easy and straight forward. No heaviness of content, no complexity of story.

There are three college friends Hari Kumar, Ryan Oberoi and Alok Gupta in the story. They are first year Mechanical Engineering students. The locale of the novel is the most prestigious technological institute of India - IIT Delhi. Hari is the narrator of the story. He is an average student; he is an impassive and quiet sort of young guy. Alok hails from a poor family. He is a cry-baby. He has to shoulder his family. He wants a good job only then he can support his family. Ryan is creative and more intellectual than his friends. He is smart and classy and an out-spoken person. He has a different perception on things and situations. He is not a 'yes' personality. He is very innovative in his opinions and ideas. All the three have one common thing that they cannot cope with the current academic atmosphere in their college.

There is a girl, Neha Cherian, the daughter of Professor Cherian. Hari and Neha are in love. They periodically meet and once enjoy physical pleasures too. Professor Cherian is the professor and Head of the Mechanical Department of the college in which the three are studying. He is an imperious teacher. He has some rigid rules and principles for himself and his profession. Neha does not always agree with her father. She has some objections over her father's parental over-expectations. The academic environment in the college is strict and monotonous. There is little scope for new and original ideas. Much work is based on mugging up or cramming. The Grade Point Average (GPA) system does not endorse

innovativeness or creativity of any kind. The students madly rush after the maximum GPA. Furthermore, the teachers and their approaches have become almost outmoded. These three friends are not rank-holders. They can secure an average score of five points and something.

The story is not about the top-rankers of the college instead it is a story about the average students, the under performers or a type of losers. It reveals the inner sentiments of the average students who are underrated or not given needed importance in the classrooms. This trio feel themselves trapped in the cruel system. They cannot adapt to it. They are not interested in the lengthy assignments, surprise exams and mugging up the theories and formulas.

The novel, *Five Point Someone*, becomes very entertaining with the numerous attempts of the trio to cope with the strict and lifeless system of education in one of the topmost technological institutions of India. The IIT students are anticipated to win over the world but in the real sense of the term, they are attempting to survive in the grade system which nurtures in them precisely nothing. The situation becomes so pitiful when Alok attempts suicide and Samir the only brother of Neha commits suicide for not being able to get through the entrance test to enter IIT. The letter of Samir, addressed to his sister Neha, reveals the mental pressures and stress endured by youths both boys and girls because of the over-expectations and pointless control over children by their parents. The ambience of IIT which is presented in the novel may not be an exact image of the IIT culture of the time; even it uncovers many foolishness and infirmity of the educational system of India. The only glimpse of hope is found in the concerned behaviour of Professor Veera who recognises the inventiveness and creativity of the students and supports them. He is a symbolic exemplification of an ideal teacher who motivates the students for their honest creativeness and originality of ideas. He is a very good example of humaneness expected in educational

institutes. He has a high sense of finding the best in both the under performers and high performers and providing the right guidance to the talents.

The end of the novel, *Five Point Someone*, is very touching. The strictness of the education system is declared in the convocation address of Cherian. In the beginning, he is a very rigid and moralistic person but in the climax he realizes that the GPA can make the best student but not the best human. Including the studies, rank and GPA, there are several other things that must be given equal importance in life like friends, family, internal goals and dreams. The triumph of education lies not only in grade points but also in making the students efficient enough to survive and progress in the real world outside the colleges.

Though the novel portrays the pressurized college life of average students of one of the topmost technical institutes of India, the style is very funny, clever, ingenious and engaging. The narration has a comical flavour. The conversations and descriptions are humorous and brilliant. The novel is written in a simple and entertaining tone. The story is playful but touching. Bhagat has given much of his energy and efforts for making it a perfect book.

It is an inclination of Bhagat to portray the contemporary urban middle-class society in his novels. He too hails from the urban middle-class family. So his portrayal of the same in his novels reflects the ground reality of the contemporary Indian urban milieu. As *Five Point Someone* is his debut novel, he has written this novel with the aim of the pure entertainment of the reader. Yet, it reflects glimpses of the contemporary Indian society and its main issues.

The patriarchy is a strong base of culture in all the region of world. It is mostly interconnected with a physical and ideological control of women's sexuality and labour at workplace and home. Indian women are exploited, discriminated, treated as weak, dependent, and subjective. Yet, Western culture has come out with liberal attitude and approaches

towards women. There are few feministic movements and literature lead their education, social services, legal rights, etc.

A woman, specifically in a nation like India where patriarchy is an accepted notion in all standards of life, is not supposed to make a demand for it. Yet it is not a genuine demand, there is something obsessed in our psyche that we daunt and discourage any such demand surfacing from the woman folk. It seems as if sex is something personal property or patent or fundamental right of men and women are nothing but a source which can be used any moment in any way.

In *Five Point Someone* Bhagat introduces premarital sex as a natural need in the youth. He is a broad-minded person who feels no shade of insular preoccupation for sex before marriage. The day Neha Cherian loses her virginity is a very important day in her family. It is the day her brother has committed suicide. Her mother went to “that temple by the tracks” (164) to pray and cry for her son and her father is “less than a kilometre away in his office” (169) Neha bolsters Hari and both indulge in a premarital sexual intercourse. Bhagat plans this activity to happen in Neha’s house. He also tells how demand for sex naturally grows in girls more predominantly than in boys. Hari has nothing of this kind in his mind when he comes to meet Neha but he surrenders before her seduction. He says, “We kissed, and then we kissed again. Then she held my hand and did something that she had never done before; she put it on her breast” (168).

From Bhagat’s perspective women are in no way inferior to men. They are equal to them in all aspects. He is a campaigner to the freedom and empowerment of women but the pity is that he has equalled them only in doing mischievous things and taking wrong turns. Neha has never smoked a cigarette but after losing her virginity she also likes to have a buff like Hari. She relishes her loss of virginity and shows gratitude to her partner, which reveals her hunger and lust for sex. When Hari says in an understatement, “That was quite...

amazing” (169). Neha says, “Thanks. I like it too” (169) daringly. The word “Thanks” is very significant here which proposes how thoughtfully she might have longed for it after getting which she thanks her lover so earnestly. In a way Bhagat is a co-ordinator who believes the need of his characters and gives it on time. In the true sense it is he who deserves the “thank” of his women for satisfying and quenching their long-craved thirst.

A close examination of the novel, *Five Point Someone*, brings to the surface certain other problems of contemporary Indian society along with the problems of contemporary Indian education system. They are the complication of dowry, the issues of generation gap and certain other issues related to middle-class obstacles. The primary consideration of the themes of the novel is on the severity of the education system and the subsequence of the same in the students’ life and their careers. The sequence of the events in the novel is based on the notoriety of the trio Hari, Ryan and Alok to revolt against the intransigence of the system and the troubles caused by the same. Though the novel has been written for the purpose of entertaining the readers, it highlights the realistic image of the contemporary Indian society. Bhagat has intentionally attempted to make it true fun but the presentation, the incidents and the theme deals with some despicable image of the society where the problem of dowry is still affecting the life of middle-class families and modernity has made the generation gap between children and parents in India.

Bhagat has comically depicted the problem of dowry in *Five Point Someone*. Alok is from a poor family. He has an elder sister in the marriageable age. The family is not in a condition of finding a suited groom for her due to the burden of dowry. Alok’s father is a bedridden patient and his mother’s salary is not enough even to run the family. So it is not possible to give dowry to the groom. The family is also scared of that the older she gets, the more dowry they have to give. Their only hope is Alok. If Alok secures a good job after finishing his studies, the marriage of his sister is possible. This is one of the things that

constantly haunts Alok. He is in constant pressure of the social responsibilities overloaded on him. He is stressful due to the family liability and the same is affecting his studies. Alok's joy and stress are echoed in the telephonic conversations with his mother on his sister's engagement:

Hello Mummy, How are you? Yes, I know I have not come home for a long time.

What? Didi got engaged? You mean the boy's side has agreed?

I am really very happy, how is Dad...I know... of course. I'll pay everything once I get a job mom. Yes, you are taking loan for gifts... (154)

The severity of the problem of dowry is portrayed so painfully that poverty-stricken family of Alok has to arrange the dowry by loan and the young boy is ready to repay everything as soon as he secures a job. Alok's mother tells that the groom's family demands a car and they agree on till he starts earning but they have made a vow that wedding will be conducted only after the giving car. The narrator of story, Hari feels that it is a deal of some kind. When Hari asks the reason of the hurry for the marriage of his sister, Alok says: "The older she gets, the more dowry people will demand. Waiting will mean more expense later. I am happy the deal is cut" (154-55). Later the engagement of Alok's sister is broken because the groom's family is not ready to wait till Alok starts earning. The real cause behind it is that they have a better deal from another family.

Bhagat does not extend the issue of dowry further in the action of novel but he throws a little light on the critical issue of dowry and its impacts on lower-class families of contemporary India. The problem of dowry keeps the family of Alok in pressure. His ailing father does not eat sometimes due to the pressure of his daughter's wedding. The family budget is disturbed because of it as Alok's mother has to have a loan for giving dowry to the groom's family. Alok also lives in pressure to study and get an immediate job so that he can help his family. Though Bhagat has not given much room to the issue of dowry in the action

of the novel he has successfully expressed its consequences in the society. He has interlinked certain serious issues prevalent in Indian society to the theme of the novel that makes it an imploring literature.

One of the most serious problems of contemporary Indian family system is the widening gap between the old generation and the young generation. The old generation is comparatively traditional and rigid and the young generation is advanced in its different approaches to life.

The younger generation readily accepts the innovations and changes in comparison to the older generation. The new generation can readily adapt science and technology. The modern values of life are readily adapted by the younger generation whereas the older generation cannot adapt the same instantaneously. The thought process of the younger generation is advanced quite differently from the older one. The conventional approaches to life have some present relevance at the time of modern insecurity and uncertainty but the modern values also have their own implications. The conventional Indian family structure has its exceptional merits. It has all the advantages in the context of the typical Indian society; yet westernization and modernization have made some everlasting effects on it. The western ethical system attracts the younger generation, as it gives much power of thinking and freedom of behavior. The modern generation uses scientific and technological method at every step of life. The modernity has extended the horizon of thinking. The younger generation varies from the older generation in understanding, behaving and thinking. There are some valid advantages of modernized approach to life but the same uncouples the younger generation from the already existed ideas and principles of the remarkable Indian culture which have practical relevance in the contemporary Indian society.

The generation gap in the Indian family structure is viewed in the different approaches to life as in the thinking process in various areas like marriages, and man-woman

relationship, educational opportunities, job selection and earning resources and many such things. The new generation witnesses the worldwide educational opportunities. The power of science and fast evolving technology appeal them a lot.

In the novel *Five Point Someone*, the generation gap between the young students and the experienced professors is perfectly presented in course of the novel. Also the generation gap between Ryan and his NRI parents, between Neha and her father and between Samir and his father is portrayed exceptionally.

In the novel generation gap is evidently observed in the thinking and behavioural pattern between the young students and the experienced professors. The experienced professors like Professor Dubey, Professor Cherian and Professor Vohra have traditional method of dealing with their students as per the way they are perhaps taken up in their own student life. They anticipate the students to be silent and sincere and they must think straight as per their traditional philosophy of life. The old generation believes in traditional approaches of teaching whereas the new generation believes in the modern approaches of learning where creativity and innovativeness have space. The new generation students like Ryan, Hari, Alok and others are not in a condition to cope with the strict educational system and they experience a lot of stress and pressure as they cannot revolt against the system directly.

Bhagat in *Five Point Someone* also throws light on the deterioration of the Indian family value system. Neha, Professor Cherian's daughter, is portrayed as a woman character with modern outlooks. In the family of Professor Cherian, one cannot see any family bonding which is based on care or kindness, love or affection. Modernity has left the family nowhere. Samir is a guy who fears to share his problems with his patriarchal father. Professor Cherian is the male chauvinistic husband and as a father he never bothers about the space a father should give to share their personal problems. The whole family lives in a house but everyone

has created their own small world. Though Neha has all love for her demised brother Samir, she is not very serious about his life. She dates with Hari who is a flamboyant young boy and who has the habits of drinking and smoking. He is also not serious about his life. Neha is not sincerely in love with Hari as she has never spoken or expected Ryan to tell the three magic words to express love. When her parents go to pray for her brother Samir, she enjoys having sex with her boyfriend and also demands cigarette as she thinks smoking a cigarette is good after having sex. One can say that Neha never bothers about the forceful ethics of Indian family system. Sex with a boy, who is very deceptive in his studies and life, and when the parents are a kilometre away can never be an Indian family value. She deceives her parents for her sensual pleasure. She shatters the faith of her parents on her. All this takes place because Professor Cherian's family is not made on admirable Indian family value system otherwise such things cannot happen.

Bhagat is sometimes indicted for intentionally putting in his novels sensual episodes where young boys and girls freely enjoy sex. To some scholars, it is deliberately done for grasping larger readership as young readers like such episodes. This is like some hot scenes in the Hindi films to make larger audience. In every novel, such an episode is there so the critics go to the extent of stating that Bhagat is a porno-writer. In backing him, one can claim that this is also an evident reality of the contemporary India. Many young girls and boys now a days, have an attitude to enjoy sex openly. Sex is still a taboo area for public debates and discussions but one cannot refuse that Indian value system in this issue is much damaged now. It cannot be totally denied that presenting hot scenes in every novel is Bhagat's strategy to attract readership but it can also be taken as one of the sombre sides of the contemporary India.

Indian society is predominantly categorised into three social kinds like the upper-class, the middle-class and the lower-class. The sizeable part of Indian population comes in

the classification of the middle-class. The population of the middle-class is practically categorised into upper middle-class and lower middle-class. In the era of modernization and globalization the growth of the urban areas of the nation has been very much up-and-coming.

With the urban progression, the middle-class people receive ample benefits of growth like quality education, good health, hygienic sanitation, proper transport, considerable employment opportunities, and so on. Along with that, the middle-class should endure some sort of obstacles also. The urban regions of the nation are swamped with larger population, so the issues of slums, pollution, traffic, shortage of residences, job insecurity and inflation are intense.

Urban middle-class social background is a primary thematic concern of Bhagat in all of his novels. The dilemmas and sentiments of the urban middle-class people are principally reflected in his novels. He himself belongs to an urban middle-class family, so he portrays such a society with his personal perceptions and experiences. The sufferings of the lower middle-class people have been presented in *Five Point Someone*. Alok's family in the novel has been utilised to project lower middle-class hardships. The family encounters regular shortage of money for the running of the family. Both his mother and father are teachers. Because of health issues, his father had to quit the job. His mother is the only earning source of the family. There is an elder sister for Alok who is of marriageable age. They do not have enough money to give dowry, so her engagement is not possible. Alok is the only ray of hope in the family to get rid of their poverty. He has passion for arts and painting but he leaves his hobby and now he is in the IIT which assures a job soon after the completion of his studies.

In the novel, Bhagat has not discussed about the problems of the poor middle-class family in detail. It is a part of the tale of Alok's life. The illustration of Alok's poor middle-class upbringing makes it apparent why IIT is a necessary choice for him. The poor backdrop

of Alok pressures him to study sincerely by keeping aside all the amusements of college life. It makes a lot of stress and pressure in the mind of Alok. The agonies of poor class misfortune are even more severe than interpreted by Bhagat in *Five Point Someone*. Man has to make a lot of compromises to live. Those who are living in the urban areas have to maintain certain standards of life although they are not in their reach. The middle-class has to suffer a lot because inflation or price hike affects them critically.

Bhagat does not go much closer to illustrate the poor middle-class issues but he has just taken a chance to provide a glimpse of it. The monthly budget of Alok's family is complicated as soon as the monthly income of his father is stopped. The middle-class people have very limited sources of income in India and the regular expenses are rising. Such a family cannot save for emergency expenditure like sudden medical expenses, etc. so any break in regular income affects the life of the family. As the result of it, pressure, stress, tension, depression and worry get hold of the family and the life of the whole family is disturbed.

Bhagat has very methodically raised and also mockingly criticized certain problems of the education system in India. He has also drawn the attention of the readers to the damaging impacts of the same by making certain realistic situations in the novel. He has expressed that parental and patriarchal over-expectations lead to suicides, over strictness in educational system shatters the creativity and innovative passions of the new generation and the goal of education is not only to make good engineers, teachers, doctors, managers, or technocrats but also to make good humans. Education being an integral part of life has a pivotal role to play in society for producing good humans that keep alive the spirit of humanity. The system of education must be highly dynamic and affordable to every student with skills to flourish their potentials for the betterment of self, of the society and of the country.

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